



Inspirational Health Stories

Maria Aguon from San Diego, California - Why Is Maria Smiling?

Maria Aguon has every reason to be smiling. At 83 years of age, she is as active and as healthy as ever. I am fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to hear Maria's personal story and am excited to share it with others during Older American's Month. Reading her story really does not do justice to the warm heart behind the beaming grin. She truly is an amazing individual who has taken the necessary steps to lead a healthier lifestyle.

Maria was born in Guam and raised on her father's farm. Growing up during World War II, she described how her family lived off the land eating native fruits and vegetables. At a young age she developed a fondness for potatoes, yams, and bananas. At the time, she did not realize that these fruits would provide the vital nutrients she needed to become a healthy young woman. After a few years time, Maria moved to San Diego with her new husband, who was a serviceman in the United States Navy. Maria continues to reside there today.

At the age of 79, Maria was living with her daughter when she first "started wellness," as she calls it. Maria is describing a program at the Navy Medical Center in San Diego with the Health Promotion Department that benefits retired Navy servicemen and women and their beneficiaries. The Senior Wellness Program is a thirteen-week program that combines exercise as well as informative health and fitness lectures. Maria values the program so much that she has been involved in the program for four years and continues to come back each new session.

The Senior Wellness Program includes a comprehensive senior fitness assessment administered at the beginning and upon completion of the program. The assessment includes a battery of six test items that measure the physical abilities needed to remain active and independent in later years. Maria is one of the older adults that have seen significant gains in the six areas of testing. Maria received the score of 19 in the chair stand test, where the normal range for a functional fitness level is 14. Revealing her above-average lower body strength when compared to other older adults in her age and gender group. She also scored above average for the number of steps she completed in a timed two-minute step test. Her ability to continue

to advance in physical capabilities including flexibility and aerobic endurance is astounding.

She is extremely active outside of the program as well, walking almost two hour a day. She has also participated in various philanthropic walks throughout the community of San Diego, including the walk for the fight against breast cancer and the MS walk. Maria also stretches every morning and enjoys dancing whenever she has the opportunity to do so. Participation in these activities "clears her mind and relieves her stress," according to Maria.

When I asked Maria about what makes her such a beautiful person inside and out, she informed me that her "positive attitude, exercising and eating healthy food" can be attributed to her cheery disposition. She told me that she always smiles and just minds her own business. This is some useful advice that we can all use from time to time. Maria also recommends her favorite breakfast dishes: oatmeal with peaches or a smoothie made with fresh strawberries and bananas. She consumes over five fruits and vegetables a day and because of the knowledge she has gained through the Senior Wellness Program she knows that this is vital to her health. Maria has every reason to smile because she is happy and healthy!



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Mary Louise Stillman from San Bruno, California

Mary Louise Stillman is a grandmother raising her grandchildren. Though currently caring for only three children (twin eighteen-year old girls and an eleven-year old boy), Mrs. Stillman was at one point the primary caregiver of seven children, ranging in age from three to eighteen. Most impressive, Mrs. Stillman has kept her grandchildren and herself healthy by making good lifestyle choices on a limited budget.

With a successful career as a senior accountant, Mrs. Stillman had to resign her job in order to raise her new family. "I sometimes feel like the old lady in the shoe," Mrs. Stillman joked as she described how she has managed to provide healthy food for her family. "I have to be very creative and make most things from scratch." The Stillman household eats a lot of soups made with fresh vegetables and they skip the expensive luxury items like soda that are high in sugar and calories.

Exercise is also an important part of Mrs. Stillman's routine. Her eleven year old grandson was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and she finds it takes a lot of energy to keep up with him. To keep physically healthy Mrs. Stillman says she walks a lot. Just as important, Mrs. Stillman goes to movies during the day when the kids are at school. This respite break helps her stay mentally and emotionally healthy.

Those of us that say "I just can't find the time to exercise and eat right" can learn a lesson from Mary Stillman.



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Dale Peterson from McDonough, Georgia

In 2002, at the age of 70, I was diagnosed with Waldenström's Macroglobulinemia, a rare disorder characterized by the overproduction of an IgM protein in the bone marrow. Symptoms are anemia and hyperviscosity. Eight rounds of chemotherapy put the disease into remission.

I then purchased a retirement home in a neighborhood where the property was maintained by the homeowner's association and adopted a watch-and-wait attitude. It was very pleasant not having to mow or fertilize the lawn, but the sedentary lifestyle was causing me to become more overweight and less energetic. Selective dieting did not result in any loss of weight.

My wife and I decided to join the aerobics classes at the Henry County Senior Center to improve our overall health. The classes met for one hour three times each week. Benefits were realized almost immediately. I began to feel much better and had considerably more energy. Exercising under the leadership of a capable instructor with a group of other seniors in an esthetic environment proved to be much more enjoyable than exercising at home. This routine better ensured that you exercised the necessary number of hours each week. An additional plus was meeting and exercising with many interesting people while forming new friendships.

Exercise alone, however, did not result in sufficient weight loss. I was 15 pounds overweight and diagnosed as being insulin resistant, a condition that exists before the onset of adult diabetes. It also causes a significant increase in the risk of atherosclerosis. My family doctor placed me on a modified diet and prescribed 6 hours of exercise each week. It was either that or medication. Within three weeks the combination of diet and exercise resulted in the loss of the excess weight. I will not know until my next physical how much the threat of diabetes is reduced. However, the latest blood analysis found the levels of triglycerides (55) and cholesterol (156) to be optimal.

One of my best decisions was to participate in the aerobics classes at the Senior Center. After two years in the exercise program, I have regained the

feeling of vitality that I enjoyed when I was much younger and I am again making long-range plans.



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Regina D. Coles from Atlanta, Georgia - My Journey to Living a Healthier Lifestyle

At the age of forty, my health was something that I took for granted. I was 165 pounds and I wore a size 16. I was eating whatever I wanted to eat without any thought of how my eating habits were affecting my health.

I failed to get regular physical exams during this time because I felt fine and I saw no reason to schedule regular doctor's office visits. However, all of that changed with an office visit that I scheduled with a new physician. He explained to me what cholesterol and heart disease were, as well as other health problems that develop as we age.

My test results indicated a cholesterol level of 304, and my blood pressure was elevated as well as my sugar level. I was shocked to learn that all of this was going on at the same time and I was determined that I was going to follow the lifestyle changes that my doctor recommended. He added that making these changes would lead to a healthier and happier way of living.

My doctor advised me to begin an exercise program that I could enjoy so that I could remain motivated enough to stick with it. The next day I began to run on a nearby high school track. When I first began, I only ran as far as I felt comfortable running, then I would stop and start to walk. I gradually increased my distance to 3 miles. I always made sure that I had plenty of water to drink after my run.

The next change I had to make was my diet. When my doctor explained the changes that I had to make, I thought he was joking. It turns out that he was quite serious. He recommended chicken and fish, which had to be broiled or baked without the skin. I could eat lean cuts of beef twice a week prepared the same way as the skinless chicken and fish. I also had to learn to eliminate some of the fat from my foods. I became conscious of how much fat I was consuming. I also began to read the labels on the food I bought and began making better choices.

Of course I complained because I missed my old way of preparing my meals. You see, I loved fried fish and chicken and fresh collards, turnips, cabbage

and green beans prepared with salt pork. I must admit that I was truly amazed when at the end of six weeks I noticed that I was actually losing weight as a result of my lifestyle change.

I realized six months later that this new lifestyle change would become a permanent way of living because one of the benefits was my changed attitude towards life. I began to develop a positive attitude towards life. I also became more outgoing and ready to face new challenges.

After one year, my blood pressure drastically declined and so did my sugar level. My weight returned to normal and I learned to enjoy my new way of eating. I looked and felt younger and I noticed that I had more energy.

Of course I've faced some illnesses along the way, some more serious than others. Last year I experienced an illness that was potentially fatal. I was told by my doctor that my survival was possibly due to the diet and exercise changes that I had made many years ago and maintained throughout the years.

By the time I became an older American I was celebrating a new body with a transformed mind. I feel that the changes that I was determined to make in my younger years have greatly affected my health and appearance today.

Thanks to the lifestyle changes that I made nearly thirty years ago, today I feel great and I am blessed to be an active, healthy and productive older American.



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Bruce Casale, from Newark, Delaware - "A Positive Attitude-The Best Medicine"

He was only 52 years old, but he was carrying over 400 pounds on his 5'10" frame and 60" waist. He had been overweight his entire life. He knew his excessive weight kept him from doing most of the things others take for granted. His legs ached from the pressure the weight caused. Combine that with a very stressful managerial position, and you have all the ingredients for that feared word – "Stroke!" Could such an event actually be for your good? Bruce Casale found out that, although a stroke is never good, it was a lifestyle-altering and life-saving experience for him. Through his story, he hopes it will be so for many others, too.

Not one, but two, strokes struck Bruce in one month, completely changing his life. He no longer could walk, talk, read, or write. But at least he wasn't paralyzed. Gradually he learned to walk again - first with a walker, then a cane, and now without assistance. Reading and writing would also have to be relearned. In fact, math and numbers just suddenly "came back to him" one day. Talking and writing would take longer. The hospitalization was four months long. During those months Bruce knew that his positive attitude was the "key" to recovery. He chose to adopt a "glass half-full" mentality and took each day as it came. Recovery was difficult and required hard work every day. But he never gave up. Besides his optimistic mental attitude, Bruce credits his remarkable recovery to his wife Katie and their two children. They inspired him to get well. And well he has become.

Today at 54, Bruce is not the same person – both figuratively and literally. Now at a weight of 220 pounds, he has literally "lost another person" versus his former weight. Before the strokes, he thought little about diet and exercise. Now he walks 5-6 miles a day and follows a healthy diet. He also works out daily in the Fitness Center of the Newark Senior Center in Newark, Delaware, where he gives talks on stroke survival and participates in discussion groups. Bruce can now write again, and he has just recently begun to read again. He's also come to enjoy sending e-mail on his PC, an experience he calls "freeing". Though he still has a ways to go, he is making steady progress daily, for which he is grateful.

Bruce has been recognized by not only the staff of his senior center as one of their "Healthy Heroes", but by a number of other civic and state organizations, too. He has become a speaker for the American Stroke Association, giving presentations at other senior centers and to other groups in his community.

What is Bruce's next major goal? To take his story into the corporate world where countless others need to hear his life-changing message before a stroke hits them. It's a message he feels strongly must be passed on. Stroke prevention has become his passion so others can become proactive, rather than just reactive. Bruce knows he has, forever, been changed for the better by his "stroke of luck".



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Bob Harrington, from Alexandria, Virginia

Robert “Bob” Harrington is an inspiration. His “energizer bunny” mentality is the envy of even forty-somethings! For over ten years, Bob has been teaching senior aerobics at the Springfield Senior Center. He wasn’t always so active. He started teaching when the previous instructor, his wife, became ill. He didn’t want to let her class down, but he had no idea how to teach. She sat and guided him while he struggled through the first few classes – and then he found that he really enjoyed it – losing weight, feeling good, more energy – he was hooked! He took classes at the local community college to learn more about fitness and teaching, and the class size grew. Although he has been offered numerous times to become a paid staff member, Bob declines the offer.

He loves what he is doing – inspiring others to lead healthy lifestyles. “It takes a lot of work to keep these old machines going, but it can be fun, too – great music from the 40’s, and camaraderie – grabbing life one day at a time!” Bob doesn’t say that lightly, either. He struggled with prostate cancer and treatment and STILL rarely missed teaching his “groupies”. Attendance at his class is never less than 20, often much more than that – the room is packed – and still they come, for his sense of humor, individual attention, and a tough, age appropriate work out.

Every year, the senior center participates in the Food & Nutrition Program’s Fitness Challenge, and Bob grabs the reins and steers the group to the lead. He encourages them to fill out the entry forms and follow through. “You can’t just diet if you expect to lose weight, you have to move it, too!” He leads by example, filling his exercise log out for others to see, and assisting the other participants fill out theirs. His pride in them while distributing the polo shirt prizes was heartwarming - even people with age related physical challenges participated, and his praise and encouragement gave them hope.

When Bob was still in high school, WWII broke out. Bob persuaded his mother to sign the release form so he could enlist. He joined the navy and proudly served his country for the duration of the war. Upon his return, he went back to high school, by now older than the other students, and completed his degree. His tenacity has been a lifetime trait. He met his wife, Polly, during the war, and their partnership is still strong. His family bonds

are an important part of his youthful outlook. He attends all of his grandsons soccer games and leads the cheering section. He is active in a pickle ball group at George Mason University and continues to take classes to update his teaching skills at Northern Virginia Community Colleges' Physical Education Department. He is a muse to us all, seniors and soon-to-be!